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AUTHOR Parkinson, Kevin J.; Broderick, John S.
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ABSTRACT

As part of a study of the development and implementation of the National Core Curricula (NCC) in Australia, a historical background was prepared from a number of data sources and views on NCC were sought from senior Technical and Further Education (TAFE) officers in Australia. More specific information was sought in three case studies, the project findings were developed, and recommendations were formulated. Principal conclusions included the following: (1) the task force approach to the management of NCC development is appropriate and effective; (2) the research, development, and diffusion model of curriculum design commonly used in NCC development does not enhance the degree of fidelity in their implementation; (3) the most positive effect of NCC on standards should be the improvement in the quality of learning materials, but this benefit is not necessarily delivered to students; and (4) national industry/occupational surveys would help maintain standards of NCC. Principal benefits to students were improved mobility and a greater acceptance of state/territory vocational courses by licensing and registration authorities across Australia. Recommendations called for the use of more techniques of curriculum development, feasibility studies prior to authorization of national curriculum projects, and monitoring of NCC implementation. (YLB)

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SUMMARY REPORT

An evaluation of the implementation of national core curricula in Australia.

Kevin J. Parkinson & John S. Broderick.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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SUMMARY REPORT

BACKGROUND

In recent years about 100 national curriculum projects (NCP) have been undertaken in Australia. These projects have been managed by the Curriculum Projects Steering Group (CPSG) a standing committee of the Australian Conference of TAFE Directors (ACTD), have been partially funded by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC) and have been serviced by various national task forces and the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development. The primary objectives of NCP, as defined by the Commonwealth/state training advisory committee (COSTAC) are,

- to make effective use of scarce national resources;
- to facilitate movement of TAFE students;
- to facilitate recognition of award holders throughout Australia; and
- to provide a basis for the development of minimum national training standards.

Early in 1986 a member of the ACTD proposed that development in NCP had been such that it was time that an evaluation with emphasis on the implementation of national core curricula (NCC) was conducted. Consequently a project brief was prepared by the TAFE National Centre. This brief was accepted by the ACTD in March, 1986.

AIMS

The project had the following aims:

- to consider and to compare the range of alternative approaches to NCC development;

- for selected NCC, to evaluate the extent of the implementation of NCC in all states/territories;

- for selected NCC, to evaluate what impact NCC has had on maintenance of standards between colleges and between authorities;

- for selected NCC, to evaluate the cost effectiveness of developing and implementing core curricula;

- to evaluate the benefits to students and to teachers of NCC;

- to gather the opinions of selected representatives of industry/commerce on relevant NCC; and

- to evaluate the role of the CPSG, set up by the ACTD, in the development and implementation of NCC.

METHODOLOGY

In the general part of the study, an historical background to the development of NCC was prepared from a number of data sources and views on NCC were sought from senior TAFE officers in administrations and colleges. In the particular part of the study, more specific information was sought in three case studies, the project findings were developed and recommendations formulated.

Preliminary interviews.

Preliminary interviews consisting of open-ended questions were conducted with senior officers in TAFE administrations. In addition, interviews were conducted with principals and relevant staff of the three South Australian TAFE colleges which were the principal providers in that state of real estate, sheetmetal and automotive mechanics courses. These courses were chosen because these disciplines were those which formed topics of case studies.

These interviews were directed to determining, within the constraints of the aims of the project, the most important questions to be answered and were used to develop a structured interview schedule and a case study questionnaire.

Document analysis

The principal sources of data were the minutes of CPSG meetings, papers tabled at those meetings and reports. The documents were searched and information relating to the development of the concept of NCP and to the specifications of the project extracted.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews were conducted with the major stakeholders, that is the members of the CPSG.

The approach taken was general and was designed to obtain information on the knowledge of respondents of NCP, including NCC, and particularly of the degree of their implementation in the states/territories. Opinions of respondents were also sought on a number of aspects of national curriculum activity related to the seven aims of the project.

Case studies

It was decided to address the issues raised in the aims of the project by using a case study approach to illustrate how these issues applied to particular NCC. The three NCC chosen for the case studies were:

- automotive mechanics basic trade course;
- sheetmetal work basic trade course; and
- real estate.

These case studies were chosen in order to obtain maximum breadth of methodology and subject type and hence provide a basis for generalisation.

The case study questionnaire was administered to:

- TAFE officers who were involved with the development and/or implementation of the NCC used as case studies; and

- members of the CPSG.

In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of employers in the industries chosen for the case studies.

THE PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the responses to the interviews and questionnaires revealed a considerable amount of common ground among the stakeholders and TAFE officers involved with the development and/or implementation of the NCC used as case studies. In nearly every case the attitudes reflected in those matters on which there was common ground were positive to the development and implementation of NCC.

Based on an interpretation of these responses together with an analysis of the documentation, the principal conclusions drawn were as follows.

- The task force approach to the management of the development of NCC is appropriate and effective.

- The techniques of curriculum development used by task forces tend to be those which apply best to established vocations with fairly homogeneous work forces.

- The research, development and diffusion model of curriculum design which is commonly used in NCC development does not enhance the degree of fidelity in their implementation.

- The implementation of NCC would be enhanced by addressing constraints, such as the need for capital equipment, early in the development process.

- The most positive effect of NCC on standards should be the improvement in the quality of learning materials. However this benefit is not necessarily delivered to students.

- Although the standards of NCC are not adversely affected by lack of material and human resources for effective implementation, a degree of centralisation (even national centralisation) may be required in some cases.

- National industry/occupational surveys would help maintain standards of NCC.

- NCC projects should be continued even if CTEC funding were withdrawn.

- There are real possibilities of obtaining funding for NCC projects through private enterprise.

. The principal benefits to students of NCC are:

- improved mobility for both graduates and students; and
- a greater acceptance of state/territory vocational courses by licensing and registration authorities across Australia.

. The principal benefit to staff of NCC is better professional development through:

- the exchange of ideas;
- better ownership of the curriculum; and
- the development of a wider understanding of curriculum processes.

. Industry is aware of the influence NCC on TAFE authority programmes and sees positive effects in this influence.

. Industry expects NCC to be implemented in full, particularly where licensing and registration are involved.

. NCC projects distort the priorities of TAFE authority curriculum development projects.

. The roles of the CPSG are to:

- provide advice to the ACTD on curriculum matters; and
- be involved in the selection of and the planning and development phases of NCC.

. The involvement of the CPSG in the selection and development of NCC has led to a very positive improvement in their quality.

. CPSG should not address the specific training needs of national companies.

. The national monitoring of the implementation of NCC is necessary, but should be undertaking in a way which accommodates the responsibilities of the individual TAFE authorities.

. The national monitoring of the standards of NCC is necessary and should be undertaken on the same principles as the monitoring of implementation.

. The development and implementation of NCC does not necessarily result in savings to be states/territories.

. In the records of the CPSG, there are many cases of decisions apparently left unmade, deferred and not followed up; or made and not implemented.

. If the TAFE National Clearinghouse is to fulfil its responsibilities for the maintaining of CPSG records, then it is necessary for the secreteriat and task force conveners to deposit all relevant documentation with the clearinghouse officer in the appropriate local TAFE authority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nothing is ever so perfect that there is no room for variation or improvement; and the mechanisms adopted by the CPSG are no different in this respect from any other process. In the opinion of many who have been consulted, there is scope for some improvement. What is recommended here is designed to make better what is very good.

The general recommendations arising from this study of the implementation of NCC and the role of the CPSG in that implementation in so far as variations or improvements might be suggested are set out below.

. The possibility of using more techniques of curriculum development such as a combination of the Delphi and DACUM processes, search conferences, force field analysis and nominal group techniques in the preparation of NCC, particularly in those areas which are undergoing change, should be considered.

. Before the CPSG authorises an NCP to proceed, it should require a feasibility study to determine whether the conduct of that NCP is justified. If the project is considered to be justified, the feasibility study should be extended to specify the aims of the project, the methods of management and the techniques to be used in the development, the lead times and an estimate of the total resources required.

. The current approved form of documentation together with a statement of expected student competencies and nationally or cooperatively developed learning materials will help overcome the disadvantages of the research, development and diffusion model of curriculum design.

. Monitoring of the implementation of NCC should be undertaken in a way which accommodates the responsibilities of the individual TAFE authorities. The CPSG should be involved in this monitoring.

. The issue of the national maintenance of standards cannot be ignored and a compromise must be reached between the demands of the consumers and the reservations of the eight suppliers. The recommended compromise is that the CPSG encourage task forces to arrange for:

- the registration by the Australian Council of Tertiary Awards (ACTA) of national core courses as conducted by the different states/territories;

- the development of student assessment item banks on a national basis;

- the exchange of examination papers on a national basis; and

- the examination of the possibilities of each TAFE authority appointing external moderators.

. The cost of monitoring should be met by state/territory TAFE authorities, through the ACTD, agreeing to allocate portion of the $32.2 million per annum CTEC grant for the 1988-90 triennium for the purpose of quality improvement in TAFE.

. The selection criteria for NCC projects should contain a greater emphasis on the demands of the national interest.

. Procedures should be established to ensure that all recommendations placed before the CPSG are considered, all decisions made on these recommendations documented and disseminated to those affected by the decisions and, where appropriate, action taken to implement the decisions.

. The secretariat of the CPSG and task force conveners (or the equivalent officer where other management methods are used) should deposit all relevant documentation with the officer of the TAFE National Clearinghouse in the appropriate local TAFE authority.